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# DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF THE BALTIC REGION

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*Tadeusz Palmowski*

## FROM AN IDEA TO THE STRATEGY OF BALTIC EUROPE



*This article focuses on the historic prerequisites and forms of international cooperation in the Baltic region ("Baltic cooperation"). According to the author, Baltic Europe is being formed as a single administrative, economic, cultural and infrastructural area, which could become a new economic and cultural center of Europe. Special emphasis is given to policies and strategies of the EU in the Baltic Sea region.*

**Key words:** Baltic Sea, the Baltic Sea region, Baltic Europe, the European Union (EU), "Northern Dimension", Baltic cooperation strategy.

## Origins and forms of cooperation

The Baltic Sea has integrated peoples and countries for several centuries. Periods of co-operation mingled with times of competition and fight for regional hegemony.

Development of crafts and towns in western and central Europe in XI and XII century provided grounds for the future Hanseatic League. The fact that under the leadership of Lubeck 200 multifarious towns, including 60 towns situated on the territory of today's Europe, often far distanced from each other, managed for 500 years to retain active solidarity and loyalty towards the voluntarily joined League is an extraordinary phenomena.

The Community, which for two hundred years co-decided on the economic, political and cultural development of the Baltic region, though based on a material background, indifferent to national problems and even religious differences, valued peace and took to arms as the last resort. Cultural values developed by the Hanseatic League towns survived the disintegration of the League itself. The artistic achievements of the period and especially culture and art radiating far beyond the Baltic area are appreciated to this day.

Strong ties in co-operation and competition, rivalry in the Baltic region are imprinted in the history of the region. The sea linked people and countries, encouraged to reach for hegemony of the area. For hundreds of years it remained a region of intensive commercial activity/trade on one hand and frequent, fierce, long lasting wars for power over the Baltic.

After World War II the concept of Baltic co-operation, though expressed verbally was impeded by the partition into two political systems. The Baltic constituted the “northern flank” of political, military and ideological confrontation with two neutral countries Finland and Sweden separating two social, economic and military opposing camps. These groups were isolated by two social, economic and military systems. The balance was based on a feeling of peril mutually created by political and military doctrines. Countries lying over the Baltic were ethnically, culturally, politically and economically diversified. The only factor linking them together was their location in whole or in part over the Baltic Sea. The term Baltic Europe was at the time limited to a theoretical and subjective instrument of physical and geographical regionalisation. In terms of a category defining a developed set of political, social and economic ties it remained an abstract concept.

In 1991 the old political system underwent fundamental change creating an opportunity to overcome the artificial barriers isolating Baltic neighbours. The area of the Baltic Sea faced one of the greatest challenges in its thousand-year-old history. This was the result of transformation processes in Poland, the unification of Germany and independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, accession of Sweden and Finland to EU in 1995 as well as reinforcement of the role of the Kaliningrad Oblast as a strategic marine military base of Russia. This geopolitical change created new opportunities for intensive economic and cultural co-operation in this part of Europe.

The nineties of the XX century featured a true “explosion” of various initiatives and forms of co-operation. Owing to the number and variety of relations the situation has been termed the “Baltic co-operation phenomena” [26].

On accession of the next ten countries to the European Union with May 1, 2004, Baltic Europe entered a new development phase. The Baltic became an internal EU Sea. This fact certainly strengthened co-operation between countries around the Baltic. This meant that further joint initiatives appeared in the European Union to level the peripheral regions with the rest of the Baltic area. Political stability and economic development can in the long perspective transform the emerging Baltic Europe without borders into a new economic and cultural centre of Europe [23, p. 31].

In the first decade of XXI century the region of **Baltic Europe** — as a uniform area of administrative, economic, cultural and infrastructural relations still remains a hypothetical concept. However, there are clearly visible prerequisites for establishing a multinational functioning region [17], by establishing communication links, trade relations, a labour market, and by solving environmental problems. The most significant binding agent is the political will of co-operation in all spheres of life with a superior objective of ensuring safety in general terms (avoiding stress and conflicts, ensuring social security of the inhabitants), free flow of goods, people and information as well as environmental safety.

The beginnings of this co-operation among Nordic states date back to the previous century. After World War II Nordic countries, though differing in terms of political status, decided to undertake regional co-operation which initially was of an economic, cultural and scientific nature.

In 1952 the Nordic Council was established. The Council together with the Nordic Council of Ministers established in 1971 became the main coordinators of all aspects of internal and external policy of the Nordic states and co-operation with neighbouring states. Their activity involved seeking common solutions, which are clearly beneficial for all parties involved [7, p. 183]. The principal area of co-operation covered culture, science, education, environmental protection, protection of citizenship rights, economy, fishing and legal issues.

Special attention was put to supporting and creating conditions for direct co-operation of institutions, organisations and local self-governments as well as companies and citizens of Nordic states. The year 1977 witnessed the conclusion of an agreement regulating cross-border co-operation initiated earlier by Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The goal of Nordic co-operation is to preserve the common cultural heritage and to popularise the Scandinavian model of the commonness of culture and science inspired by democratic ideals. Special attention is given to protection of the Baltic marine environment and the whole catchment area.

The year 1991 showed the beginnings of co-operation in foreign policy and security issues.

Continuing historical ties of Scandinavia with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers helped in developing state administrative structures in these countries and supported their integration with the European Union.

Institutions focussing on Nordic co-operation have evolved through the decades<sup>7</sup>. Initially they included only some of the Nordic states but with time others joined in. Some institutions became the core attracting other Baltic States interested in co-operating in a given area. Nordic states developed a certain model of Baltic co-operation. This model or elements thereof find application in wide co-operation of all Baltic States in many areas.

## The European Union and Baltic Europe

Rising interest of the EU in Baltic Europe came with the fall of the iron curtain in 1989 and the EU expansion in 1995 and 2004. Though Denmark accessed the European Economic Community in 1973, the EU introduced the concept of Baltic Europe as whole in 1994 with the European Council Communication "Orientations for a Union Approach towards the Baltic Sea Region" [3]. It was further developed in the report in 1995 on the current state and perspective for cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region [12]. On the grounds of the above the European Council instructed the European Commission to prepare a framework document on cooperation in the region [9]. The European Commission presented the document called „Baltic Sea Region Initiative” in 1996 [4].

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<sup>7</sup> One of the oldest institutions is the Nordic Tourism Committee Nordycki Komitet Turystyki established in 1925. In the years 1945—1990 at the decision of the Nordic Council of Ministers Nordyckiej Rady Ministrów 95 joint specialised co-operation institutions were established.

At the initiative of Paavo Lipponen, the Prime Minister of Finland, a proposal was placed to establish the “**Northern Dimension**” in the European Union. The initiative was to develop and define European Union interests in Northern Europe: from Iceland to northwest Russia, from the Barents Sea to the southern coasts of the Baltic. This project was mainly addressed to Russia (its north-western part), Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and northeast Poland. Not only Finland but also the remaining Nordic states, i. e. Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland were involved in implementing the “Northern Dimension” project. The initiative was to rely on checked and well operating co-operation structures working in this part of Europe, and aid funds assigned to the region, without establishing new institutions [8, pp. 4—5].

“Northern Dimension” was aimed at improving co-ordination of European Union policy in Northern Europe and eliminating differences in economic development particularly between EU countries and Russia and EU countries and those of the former eastern block. The concept “Northern Dimension” was presented by the Fins as a platform for dialogue between countries part to the European Union and those beyond its borders. This was to prevent the risk of a new partition of Europe with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the EU and Russia, which cannot count on membership in a realistic perspective, outside its structures.

Starting 2006, the relations under the “Northern Dimension” were defined in two documents: the declaration on “Northern Dimension” policy and the document on the “Northern Dimension” policy framework. They indicated the following priorities:

- economic cooperation covering promotion of trade, investments, financial services, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, forestry, transport and logistics;
- Freedom, security and justice covering strengthened interpersonal ties, improved management on borders, efficient system of justice and court co-operation, combating; organised crime, human trade, drug trafficking, illegal immigration;
- Research, education and culture — measures reinforcing cooperation in research programmes, educational and cultural exchange;
- Environment, nuclear security and natural resources covering restricting nuclear hazards and other pollution, marine safety, protection of the Baltic and Barents Sea marine environment and biological diversity;
- Prosperity and healthcare, including prevention of contagious diseases and life style related diseases as well as cooperation in ensuring public healthcare by the particular healthcare systems in the various countries [13, pp. 17—18].

Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), Arctic Council (AC), as well as Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) play a special role under the „Northern Dimension”. Following the accession of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland to the European Union the „Northern Dimension” no longer remained a typical instrument for regional cooperation in Baltic Europe and became a cooperation platform for the EU and the Russian Federation.

## New forms of cooperation

A turning point opening a calendarium of Baltic co-operation was no doubt the release of Poland from Russian domination and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The “Explosion” of co-operation started in the nineties and has unfolded covering many areas along various lines. This collaboration takes place at all levels of state administration in various administrative sectors and also between non-governmental organisations.

Clause 15 of the Ronneby declaration states that participation of local and regional governments of Baltic countries shall encourage “development of co-operation and human relations in the region to improve the Baltic sea environment, including participation of local and regional authorities, governmental and private institutions industry and non governmental organisations in trade, education, culture, information, etc.” [25, p. 48].

The conviction that free and full co-operation in the region of the Baltic Sea will be possible on the independence of Baltic States resulted in the establishment of the **Council of the Baltic Sea States**<sup>8</sup> in Copenhagen in 1992. This a form of governmental co-operation headed by ministers of foreign affairs. The superior objective of this regional project is initiating, supporting and promoting co-operation maintaining close relations with other Baltic countries and organisations.

The Copenhagen Declaration of the Council of the Baltic Sea States set six priority areas of co-operation. These were: aid for new democratic institutions, economic and technological aid and co-operation understood as an important future step in European integration, social aid and health service, environmental protection and Power supply, co-operation in the field of culture, education, tourism, information, transport and communication.

An independent organisation operating under the auspices of the Council of the Baltic Sea States is the **Baltic Sea States Subregional Conference**<sup>9</sup>. The objective of the organisation is to promote co-operation in the field of economy, technology ecology, health, social issues, education, youth, culture, transport and communication between Baltic subregions [21, p. 19]. The basic measures approved during conferences included:

- taking on the role of a contact centre in the Baltic region,
- developing a common policy for the Baltic region and its representation on the international forum towards the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the European Union and governments of particular countries,
- measures to take better advantage of the available financial resources or implementation of given projects beneficial for the whole Baltic regions,
- spreading an umbrella, similarly as CBSS, over all players and organisations in the region as well as efficient information flow and further development of subregional co-operation [21, p. 19].

The Swedish minister Gorel Thurdin inaugurated co-operation between ministries responsible for spatial planning and development of eleven coun-

<sup>8</sup> Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS).

<sup>9</sup> Baltic Sea States Subregional Conference (BSSSC).

tries of Baltic Europe, together with Norway and Belarus in August 1992 in Karlskrona. This gave the beginning to the programme „Vision and strategies around the Baltic 2010” [24].

The programme is to:

- support the development of network connections in the Baltic region,
- make transfer of knowledge, skills and know-how possible to countries undergoing economic transformation,
- enhance the scope of knowledge and information on problems and development trends of other countries in the region,
- facilitate the process of planning by popularising the development achievements and concepts in other Baltic States,
- access important infrastructural projects of international importance [22, p. 22].

This initiative is aimed at establishing a common framework for spatial structures in the future. The common strategies developed are to facilitate decision-making regarding spatial development on the national, regional and local level. Strategies and recommended measures focus on the overall interests of the Baltic Region. They are addressed to entities shaping the future of the region — politicians, administration, economic organizations, farmers, private investors, financial institutions, non governmental organisations promoting regional development and protection of the environment as well as scientific institutes dealing in spatial development.

In 1994, the Ministers relevant for spatial development in Tallinn approved a strategy for spatial development of Baltic Europe. It was one of the first projects of this type in the world, a forerunner of similar works carried out in the European Union [26, p. 95].

VASAB 2010 focuses on implementing a common strategy embracing:

- Network of settlements with balanced structure,
- Impact of transport corridors on regional development,
- Co-operation in marine transport including multimodal nodes,
- Spatial planning and development of valuable areas in terms of culture and natural environment,
- Network of yacht marinas on the Baltic,
- Cross border co-operation,
- Exchange of experience in spatial planning,
- Monitoring spatial processes [26, p. 96].

The objective of Conferences of Ministers of Transport of the Baltic Sea States is to improve the efficiency and safety of transport, to promote environmentally friendly transport means, especially ferry and intermodal transport and integrate the Baltic transport networks with the European system.

The most significant tasks relating to maritime transport include among others:

- Strengthening short sea shipping in the region's transport system,
- Improving the technical conditions and modernising sea port infrastructure,
- Co-ordinating sea ports transport links with the hinterland,
- Improving efficacy and quality of services in the port sector,

- Improving safety at sea,
- Developing fair and open competition in the Baltic region,
- Upgrading standards on environmental protection [19, p. 25].

Conferences of Ministers of Transport of the Baltic Sea States, Conference of Ministers of Culture of the Baltic Sea States started with the Stockholm conference in 1993.

The Conference meetings are to stimulate cultural co-operation which is the fundamental factor shaping the identity of the Baltic region. [14, p. 61]. Joint declarations not only set out main areas of co-operation but also indicate ways of eliminating obstacles and barriers limiting this co-operation.

The new vision of the Baltic, linking together and creating opportunities of co-operation has attracted parliamentary members of countries around the basin. Meetings of MPs from Baltic States started with the Helsinki meeting in 1991. They take on the form of a forum for exchange of views on co-operation. The MP conferences gave rise to a dialogue with the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Baltic Sea States Subregional Conference, and Baltic Sea Chambers of Commerce Association, the Union of the Baltic Cities and other organisations. The necessity of joining European integration with Baltic integration was also indicated with postulates of extending regional co-operation at the local level. Considerable attention was also given to social problems in the extended European Union in the Baltic area and to environmental protection. The need to reduce pollution emission was stressed and the need for efficient power management including renewable sources. The Conference took on a new name. At present it operates under the name Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC).

## Co-operation in environmental protection of the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea features a unique ecosystem.

The beginnings of co-operation for the protection of marine biological resources date back to 1899. The deterioration of the Baltic Sea environment, a common threat to the Baltic countries, forced states of radically different political orientations to sit down together in the seventies of the twentieth century to address the common problem. [1, p. 71]. The problem of pollution and degradation of the marine environment was the first sign of Baltic integration in the geopolitical environment of those times.

The Gdańsk Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources in the Baltic Sea entered into force in 1977 and set as its objective co-operation of Baltic countries in protecting and enriching the living resources of the Baltic.

At the Finnish initiative, a Convention on the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea, known as the **Helsinki Convention** was signed in 1974. The Convention created common grounds for co-operation on marine environment protection for countries of two opposing political, ideological and economic blocks. This was a unique phenomenon worldwide. The Convention inspects all identified kinds of land based pollutants due to: land sources, sea transport, waste disposal at sea, casualties and catastrophic oil spills and consequences of search and exploitation of the



seabed. The executive body of the Helsinki Convention is the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM).

The Helsinki Convention came into force in 1980. To the year 1990 operation of the Convention depended on the political relations at the time, which resulted in degradation of the natural environment though numerous actions were undertaken.

The rapidly changing political situation in Baltic Europe resulted in initiating the revision process of the Helsinki Convention after prime ministers of Baltic countries signed the Baltic Sea Declaration in Ronneby in 1990. This process was parallel to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and revival of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia [15, p. 12] on the map of Europe.

In 1992, ministers for environmental protection of nine Baltic countries and the representatives of European Community signed in Helsinki a "new" Helsinki Convention. The Convention presented a new philosophy for marine protection emphasizing joint measures in the whole catchment area of the Baltic Sea. Special attention was paid to preventive measures as regards potential marine pollutants, use of best available technology and environmental protection practice to eliminate spot and dispersed sources.

A requirement was also introduced to prepare environmental assessment studies for investments that may have an adverse impact on the Baltic environment and the duty to control emission, water and air pollution levels. What more, society has been guaranteed wide access to information on the results of environmental control, incineration of waste on board ships sailing on the Baltic. The Convention also includes the duty to safeguard the natural marine ecosystem and coastal environment and preserve the diversity of life inhabiting the area [15, p. 13].

A turning point in recognising environmental protection as an integral part of the social and economic development of the region was the introduction of the Baltic version of the Agenda 21 called **Baltic 21**.

In 1997 Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Norway, Russia, Poland and Sweden started developing a strategy for seven basic economy sectors for which integration of ecological aspects seemed to be imperative, i. e. industry, energy, transport, forestry, fishing and tourism. The strategy was aimed at improving the life and work environment for the inhabitants of the region respecting the principles of sustainable development, regeneration of natural resources and protection of the natural environment necessary for the growing economic integration and community welfare.

The co-operation of Baltic countries on sustainable development (in the economic, social and natural environment dimensions) aim at achieving the following objectives:

- safe and healthy life environment for the present and future generations,
- economic growth and satisfying social needs,
- regional co-operation based on democracy, openness and participation,
- restoring the ecological balance of ecosystems and preservation of biological diversity, and reducing pollution of the natural environment,
- efficient and economic management of renewable resources and their exploitation within regeneration capacity,
- limiting use of non-renewable resources and popularisation of recycling recoverable materials [22, p. 56].

The multilateral co-operation on protection of the marine environment in the Baltic Sea basin, commonly viewed as the biggest regional problem [2, p. 77], has resulted in bringing progressive degradation to a halt. Measures undertaken on various levels strive to meet the challenges posed by civilisation and technological progress that threaten the natural marine environment.

## EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

On 14 December 2007 the European Council adopted a provision in Brussels that became a mandate for the European Commission to undertake work on developing an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

The Strategy is to trigger the potential of the Baltic Sea following EU enlargement in 2004. According to predictions of EC representatives the objective should be reached by implementing such priorities as: environmental protection, prosperity, attractiveness and accessibility, safety and security. The European Council was lobbied by a group of MPs, mainly from EU Baltic countries, from the informal Baltic Europe Group. The Group prepared and presented a document called „An EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region” to the EC President in November 2005. The Study had a significant impact on the Resolution referring to the future of the “Northern Dimension” [5] passed by the European Parliament on 16 December 2005. The document indicated the role of Baltic cooperation in view of EU enlargement in 2004. This was the first proposal to adopt a separate strategy for Baltic Europe which would be an intra-community element of the “Northern Dimension” (Fig. 1).

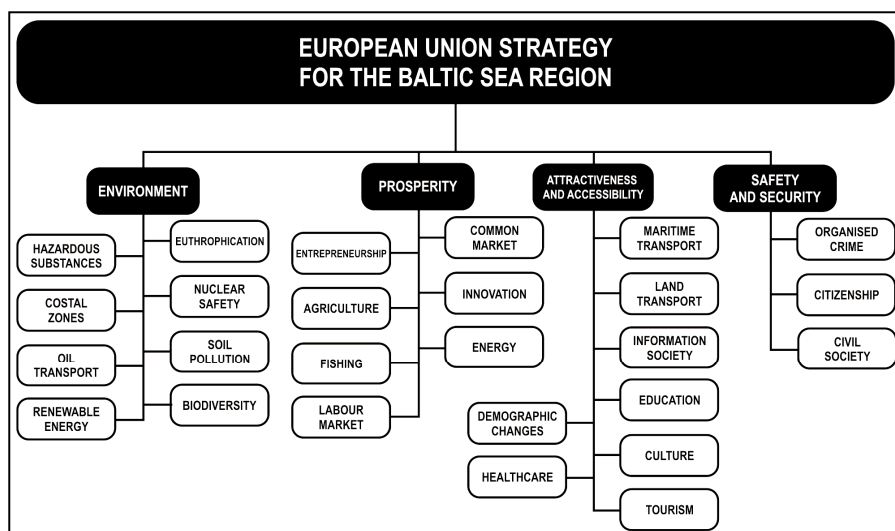


Fig. 1. Priorities and potential measures under the European Strategy for Baltic Sea Region (attached in. PDF)

Source: J. Ryba, 2008, Strategia Unii Europejskiej dla regionu Morza Bałtyckiego, Biuletyn Analiz nr 19, Office of the Committee for European Integration, Warszawa.

The European Parliament passed a resolution on Baltic Sea Region Strategy on 16 November 2006. The Resolution included an address to the European Committee to undertake work on developing a strategic document that provides a framework for:

- triggering the potential of the Baltic Sea Region following EU enlargement in 2004,
- promoting the image of the Baltic Sea as the most attractive and competitive area in global terms,
- undertaking increased efforts to improve the state of the region's environment.

The document is to become one of the three priorities under the Swedish Presidency in the EU Council in the second half of 2009.

## Conclusions

Intensification of joint Baltic initiatives in the European Union of XXI century will moderate the peripheral character of Baltic regions with the EU Strategy for Baltic Sea Region contributing to the process. Political stability and economic development may in the long-term transform the emerging borderless Baltic Europe into a European economic and cultural centre. Baltic Europe may in future shift focus from the Atlantic and partly Mediterranean Europe towards the north and east.

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